

Old and New Regimes of literary engagement

Sylvie Servoise (Le Mans-Université)

Introduction

In a recent collective volume, *Contre la littérature politique* (2024), Nathalie Quintane remarks that “today, the word *political* is everywhere in literature, perhaps to the point of diluting its force.” The same observation might well apply to the notion of *literary engagement*—or *littérature engagée*—which, after a long period of eclipse from the 1960s to the 1980s, following the postwar critiques of Sartre’s theory, re-emerged in critical discourse in the early 2000s. Yet even as this “outdated notion” (Alain Robbe-Grillet, *Pour un nouveau roman*, 1963) has made its return, it remains far from evident that it has freed itself from the stereotypes and prejudices long associated with it. This paper—building on the author’s recent work, particularly *La Littérature engagée* (2023)—seeks to advance a definition of *literary engagement* that, whether disparaged (more often) or exalted (more rarely), continues to be widely misunderstood. The proposed definition aims both to delimit the concept and to reveal the richness, complexity, and evolving nature of *littérature engagée*—*phoenix-like* in its recurrent rebirth, yet *chameleon-like* in its remarkable adaptability.

1. Toward a definition of literary engagement

Distinguishing literary from intellectual commitment

Paradoxically, the definition begins by clarifying what *literary engagement* is not: it is not identical with *intellectual engagement*. *Literary commitment* designates the public stances adopted by writers as these are manifested *in and through* their works—novels, plays, poems, essays, pamphlets, and other literary forms—rather than through media interventions, petitions, or manifestos. One should therefore turn to Camus’s *La Peste* rather than his editorials for *Combat*, or to Annie Ernaux as the author of *La Place* rather than as a signatory of newspaper op-eds. While literary and intellectual engagement may, at times, coincide, the emphasis here falls on the former.

Literature must not be eclipsed by engagement

As Sartre insisted in the *Présentation des Temps modernes*, “engagement must in no case make us forget literature.” To reflect on engagement is therefore to undertake an inquiry into literature itself—its functions; its relation to what lies beyond it (politics, society, and other discourses—political, social, historical, philosophical, or economic); and its internal

operations—how, in concrete terms, authors transmit values and inscribe politics within their texts. Only under such conditions can one grasp the intensity of the doubts and attacks directed against *littérature engagée*: to interrogate it is, inevitably, to implicate literature itself and the very conception we hold of it.

This reflection also requires clarifying what is meant by *the political*. One must distinguish between *le politique*—the political understood as the principles governing the organization of the *polis*—and *la politique*—politics as the struggle for, the exercise, and the orientation of power. Both dimensions emerge within committed literature, which encompasses not only party writers and militants but also authors who, from ethical, spiritual, religious, or ideological standpoints, seek to provoke action—or at least the desire to act—in the real world, whether to hasten, forestall, or prevent change.

A work, then, can be politically *engagé* without adhering to any doctrine or party, by leading readers to perceive the world otherwise: unveiling injustice, exposing relations of domination, or questioning the legitimacy of prevailing systems. *Engagement*, in short, is a notion that perpetually exceeds itself, compelling reflection on both the literary and the political.

Beyond Sartre : against a restricted historical window

A central thesis follows: *committed literature neither begins nor ends with Sartre*, whose theorization merely popularized the concept beyond France. It should not be confined to a relatively brief “golden age” (c. 1945–1955). Earlier forms of *combat literature* already existed, and the post-1980 period—often dismissed as a desert following the alleged “end of ideologies”—is anything but barren. We should therefore speak of the *metamorphoses* of engagement rather than its demise.

Accordingly, *literary engagement* cannot be reduced either to political tract-writing or to the interwar and postwar canon. The preferred approach is comprehensive and historically attuned, attentive to the aesthetic and formal dimensions of literary practice. As an object that links a mode of writing to a discourse on literature situated within political, literary, and cultural history—and conceived by its author as an active force—the *committed work* must be understood through the plural forms that constitute its specificity.

Yet a merely negative definition, however useful in dispelling clichés, remains insufficient. The author therefore proposes three criteria—corresponding to three interrelated gestures of writing, typically coexisting within a single text—to identify committed works across periods: (1) *exposing* (oneself and a stance); (2) *articulating* the just and the unjust ; (3)

prompting action. Together, these constitute what may be described as a *grammar of literary commitment*.

2. Grammar of literary commitment

1) *Exposing (oneself and a stance)*

Committed writing couples the public exposure of a stance with an act of self-exposure. For a text to qualify as *engagé*, it must be attributable to an authorial subject who assumes the risks to which the work itself exposes them. *Risk* is constitutive of literary commitment—from Voltaire’s imprisonment to Soviet dissidence—even if its intensity varies according to author and context. The *author-instance* frequently stages itself, sometimes overtly through a first-person voice. A seminal example is Christine de Pizan’s *Lamentacion sur les maux de France* (1410), which opens with the author “alone apart” (*seulette à part*), shaken by civil discord; her marginal position as a woman intellectual empowers her gesture as she transforms from a figure of lamentation into a writer who assumes historical responsibility and exhorts the *très hauts princes* to act.

Closer to our time, numerous non-fictional works of engagement foreground the scripter’s presence—consider the indignant opening of Bernanos’s *Les Grands Cimetières sous la lune* (1938) or the ethical scruple that structures Alexievich’s *Boys in Zinc* (1989). Other writers mediate their voice through fictional relays—for instance, Camus’s Rieux in *La Peste*, who “deliberately sides with the victims”—or through paratextual signals such as places and dates of composition, dedications, or acknowledgements. A telling example is Arno Bertina’s *Des châteaux qui brûlent* (2017), whose acknowledgements include “those of March 32”—a reference to the night following 31 March 2016, when demonstrators at Place de la République chose not to go home, inaugurating *Nuit Debout*. The author thereby clarifies the novel’s political orientation while enacting a form of citizenly *being-engaged* that mirrors the writer’s role within the text.

2) *Saying the just and the unjust*

From revealing social ills to explicitly denouncing them and advocating a cause, committed writing operates through multiple discursive modes and varying degrees of intervention. The first mode is *dévoilement*—*unveiling*—grounded in the powerful epistemic paradigm of visibility and invisibility. Injustice ought to be visible, yet is often concealed by its beneficiaries or obscured by habit and shame; it must therefore be sought out and rendered manifest. This conception has shaped the writer’s socio-political *mission*, sustaining what Paul

Bénichou termed *le sacre de l'écrivain*—the “consecration of the writer”—around 1800, and informing Sartre’s postwar theory: the engaged writer, Sartre claimed, “has chosen to unveil the world, and especially human beings to other humans, so that they may assume full responsibility before the object thus laid bare.” As one who “names what has not yet been named, or dares to speak what has not yet been spoken,” the engaged author makes audible and visible within literature that which remains muted or hidden within the social realm.

The second mode is *denunciation*. “Of course, one must write the truth—but truth in struggle against falsehood,” wrote Brecht in 1967. This denunciatory impulse may range from the univocal pamphlet (Léon Daudet, Céline, Jules Vallès, Paul Nizan) or the thesis-novel (as analyzed by Susan Suleiman) to more subtle and even ambivalent dispositifs that invite the reader’s interpretive participation. Yet committed literature is not merely negative. Like Camus’s rebel whose “no” carries a “yes,” it unites *writing against* with *writing for*. The preposition “for” here carries a double valence: *in favor of* a cause or a group, and *in order to* confront an intolerable situation, moving readers toward recognition and redress.

A frequent tactic is to let the victims speak. Thus Hugo not only writes *about Les Misérables*; he lets them speak—hence the unprecedented inclusion of *argot*, “the language of those who live in darkness,” which the novel defends as a form of expression. Contemporary works continue this politics of voice—from Maryse Condé’s *Moi, Tituba, sorcière...* (1986) to François Bon’s *Daewoo* (2004)—yet this act of delegation remains ambivalent: how can one “give voice” without reinscribing dispossession? In an era skeptical of representation, the very gesture of *writing for*—both *in favor of* and *in the name of*—has become increasingly fraught, posing one of the central challenges of contemporary engaged literature.

3) *Prompting action*

The engaged writer seeks to act upon the world through the work—to make the reader act and react. “I want influence, not power,” wrote Victor Hugo (letter to Paul Lacroix, 10 December 1848). The question, of course, is how to achieve this without pawning literature to propaganda, moral edification, or didacticism—and how, moreover, to gauge its efficacy. While no definitive answers can be claimed, two points are essential: first, these questions centrally preoccupy engaged writers; and second, the primary locus of action lies at the level of *representation*—in shaping how readers imagine the world and society. Recasting Hugo’s formulation, the engaged writer’s *power* resides precisely in *influence*: on political office-holders, certainly, but above all—since the eighteenth century—on public opinion.

In modernity, the writer aspires to a readership sufficiently broad and persuaded to circulate the positions defended and to exert pressure upon collective decisions. The action pursued is first and foremost cognitive, even if it ultimately produces tangible effects—changes in law, policy, or jurisprudence. Lamartine’s “Contre la peine de mort” (*Odes politiques*, 1830) addresses *le Peuple* (the People), counting on shifts in sensibility that would bear fruit only a century and a half later, with the abolition of the death penalty in France in 1981. Sartre similarly defines the writer’s choice as a “secondary mode of action”—an *action by unveiling*—insisting on the mediating role of society if a work is to have any real effect.

If the engaged work reorients vision and political imagination, how, precisely, does the reader pass *from text to action* (Paul Ricœur, 1986)? Hermeneutics (Ricœur), phenomenologies of reading (Ingarden, Iser), theories of collective imaginaries (Castoriadis), and reflections on literature’s relation to knowledge and truth (Nussbaum, Bouveresse) all illuminate this passage. Sartre’s account remains particularly apposite: for him, the writer’s act of unveiling is already an act that commits the author and necessarily implicates the reader who bears witness to it. In *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*, writerly responsibility implies readerly responsibility: the writer unveils “so that [others] assume full responsibility.” The juridical lexicon is significant here. Just as citizens cannot plead ignorance of the law once it is written, readers, once confronted with an unveiled world, risk complicity if they fail to respond. Reading becomes a propaedeutic to action; the reader, by the very act of reading, is already implicated.

Yet practice complicates theory. Much analysis presumes that making injustice visible automatically arouses indignation, revolt, or pity—emotions often attributed to literature’s affective power. But perceiving injustice may equally produce paralysis, weariness, or indifference; responses vary widely among readers. These limits help explain the difficulties of “engaging” literature: readers may fail or refuse to recognize as unjust what the author presents as such, or may remain inert despite genuine indignation. Hence the centrality of the *audience* for engaged writers. Many have taken seriously the question “For whom does one write?”—the title of a chapter in *Qu’est-ce que la littérature?*. Some, in prophetic nineteenth-century fashion, address “everyone,” yet also target specific interlocutors: Hugo, for instance, in the preface to *Le Dernier Jour d’un condamné* (1832), directly confronts “whoever judges,” challenging magistrates and defenders of the death penalty to “give their reasons.”

Engaged literature thus tends to constrain the proliferation of meaning—though never entirely. A gap always remains between the text’s *virtual public* (the imagined audience it constructs and solicits) and its *real public* (actual readers situated in different social, cultural,

and historical contexts). The reader's commitment—the necessary counterpart to the author's—remains, ultimately, a wager.

On this basis, committed literature may be defined, as the present author hypothesizes, as the articulation of three interdependent gestures: (1) *exposure* (of self and of stance); (2) *articulation* of the just and the unjust; and (3) *incitation* to action. Together, these gestures invite formal, rhetorical, and pragmatic analyses that interrogate both creation and reception, as well as the persuasive strategies through which writers dramatize the risks inherent in their own engagement.

3. Literary commitment as a dynamic notion

A synchronic “grammar” serving a diachronic thesis

The proposed synchronic grammar serves as a guiding thread through the labyrinth of works and centuries—less a timeless or universal model than a heuristic. It underscores the fundamentally dynamic and historical nature of literary engagement: its embeddedness in specific contexts and its continual transformation over time. Such a perspective enables us to apprehend both the persistence of the phenomenon and the singularity of its various incarnations across different historical moments.

Conditions of possibility across history

The history of *littérature engagée* lies at the intersection of several asynchronous developments whose interplay determines its configuration at any given moment. Certain historical conditions must converge for engagement to emerge: the writer's stance must be both thinkable and recognized by evolving authorities of legitimation as a form of political intervention capable of producing political effects; literature itself must be perceived as a possible and effective mode of such intervention. These conditions presuppose, in turn, three major transformations: (1) the emergence of the writer as a distinct social figure and the concomitant autonomization of the literary field; (2) the differentiation of literature from the broader sphere of the *belles-lettres*; and (3) the constitution of a public sphere in which literary works may circulate and exert influence.

Rethinking “beginnings”

Common accounts situate the emergence of committed literature at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, following the mid-nineteenth-century consolidation of an autonomous literary field—on the assumption that “engagement” becomes possible only once “disengagement” itself is conceivable. By redefining engagement at the intersection of the three

parameters outlined above—writer and field autonomy, literary specificity, and the constitution of a public sphere—the author identifies earlier premises, already traceable to the fifteenth century, during the formative stages of these processes. She proposes designating the period from the fifteenth century to the eve of the French Revolution as an *ancien régime of engagement*, characterized by experimentation with multiple authorial roles: the prophetic counselor to princes (Alain Chartier, Christine de Pizan); the militant humanist of the *Respublica Litteraria* (Thomas More, with the invention of utopia); the partisan poet of the Wars of Religion (Ronsard, d'Aubigné); and the *philosophe* writer (Voltaire)—all situated within an ongoing renegotiation of the writer's autonomy vis-à-vis political power and the expansion of the reading public.

Contemporary metamorphoses and concluding correction of a “decline” narrative

At the opposite end of the spectrum, maintaining both the evolutionary parameters and the proposed grammar in view supports the claim that *engagement littéraire* has not disappeared but continues to mutate—given the current crisis of the writer's (and literature's) status, the shifting objects of political stance (ecology, gender domination), and the transformation of public spheres and modes of exchange (media, digital networks). The author thus challenges the familiar “reverse parabola” narrative, according to which the post–Second World War theorization represents a peak followed by decline culminating in the alleged contemporary “end of ideologies.” Such a schema is inadequate: not only do committed works persist, but the phenomenon's evolution is neither linear nor teleological. Earlier writers did not merely “prepare” Sartre, nor does Christine de Pizan “prefigure” Simone de Beauvoir. Contemporary commitment is not a diluted echo of a lost golden age; rather, the committed work constitutes a dynamic form that, depending on context, privileges certain dispositifs, aesthetic strategies, and objects of engagement while retaining the memory of its earlier configurations.